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A unique oral history project will record Partition stories told by survivors across India and the globe

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Guneeta Singh Bhalla's grandfather refused to believe Partition was going to be a reality. He stayed put in Lahore till he was caught in the communal frenzy that left him with no option but to leave. The father of three had several narrow escapes en route to Amritsar. His car was fired at as he drove down roads strewn with the bodies of riot victims.

Bhalla's grandmother had earlier escaped the carnage as she took a train to India with her children. A month later, the family was reunited at a refugee camp. But tens of thousands of others were not as lucky — they were killed while trying to cross the borders to India and Pakistan.

Bhalla, a 34-year-old US-based physicist, grew up listening to these stories from her grandmother who remained traumatized till her death. She regretted not having recorded them and this prompted her to start the '1947 Partition Archive'

Partition stories, in first person



SURVIVOR SAGA: Bibi Kuljip Kaur (right), flanked by her daughter-in-law, recalls the armed women on horseback who defended her caravan as she migrated on foot from Narowal in Pakistan to Batala

two years ago. The project aims to record similar memories for the first such oral history initiative using crowdsourcing.

"As part of the project, we conduct free classes to train volunteers how to collect stories. So far 300 people have been trained and they have collected stories from nine countries including Mexico, Poland and even Israel," said Bhalla during a recent India visit. "They have video-graphed over 700 stories and

recorded them digitally."

Some of these videos are currently available on the project's website, which will soon have a feature to help survivors connect online. The rest of the unedited footage will be available for streaming soon, which would cost around Rs 35 lakh. Most of this will come from donations and an American India Foundation grant.

Bhalla said the project has grown beyond her expectations in just two years and demanded so much atten-

tion that it forced her, in part, to quit her postdoctoral research fellowship at University of California, Berkeley. The idea for the project had first occurred to her when she was in school. Around 20 of the 100 people Bhalla interviewed have died while most Partition survivors are now in their 70s and 80s, forcing them to expedite the project to record as many stories.

"We are sending 20 scholars, who will fan out across the subcontinent, to collect stories," said Bhalla. She added the Partition narrative has been mostly confined to Punjab, but the project will have stories from survivors across the subcontinent and the rest of the globe.

The project's India coordinator, Shagufa Siddi, pointed out Partition is usually seen through the prism of politics and hatred, but there are stories of compassion related to it too.

"There is a story of a young Hindu boy orphaned during Partition. He arrived in India with no relatives and was left to fend for himself at New Delhi's Purana Qila camp, where the Jamia Milia Islamia management adopted him," she said. "He grew up and was educated there and is now based in Canada."

Bhalla cited the story of a Muslim man, who saved a Hindu fellow passenger from a mob by hiding him in

the first class compartment of a train. "It was remarkable how many survivors have overcome their trauma and bitterness," she said.

But the reunion of Ali Shan (72) and Hardev Singh Grewal (76) thanks to the project is closest to her heart. The two were born in Gujjarwal village in Ludhiana, where six-year-old Shan's mother and brother had been killed in his presence in 1947. Either a Sikh or a Hindu stranger had rescued Shan and months later handed him over to his uncle, who then took him to Pakistan.

The two met at Grewal's home in California, where they are now based, and, over tea, talked about the annual village fair and their school. Later, as a teary-eyed Shan recalled his story, Grewal remembered how a group of Muslims were killed in his village and buried in a mass grave as they prepared to embrace Sikhism to save their lives. Grewal's brother managed to save some of his wounded Muslim classmates, who later left for Pakistan.

"The history of Partition that we know is mostly as told by historians. But the oral histories are not analytical or judgmental," said Bhalla. She added she is steering clear of politics, choosing to focus on the damage to a shared culture and heritage.